8

Conclusion: The End of 'Bamboo' Diplomacy? Back to the Future

With regard to foreign policy, Thailand should be committed to following a policy of equidistance. Thailand should try to keep on the best possible terms with Major Powers – the United States, the Soviet Union, China ... If we allow one Power to station troops here, we may get into trouble with another large Power or one of the smaller Powers. I do not want the United States forces to leave and the Soviets to come in place of them. I do not think we should have any at all. We should not ask any Major Powers to involve themselves too deeply.

– Thanat Khoman, 1975¹

'The age of "bending with the wind", a metaphor commonly used to describe Thailand's foreign policy, had come to an end', proclaimed Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan in December 1988.² His business-oriented diplomacy, culminating in the catchy slogan of 'turning Indochina from battlefield to marketplace', significantly redefined the framing of Thailand's national interest. It in turn deemphasised national security to affirm Thailand's status as an aspiring regional economic power.

1 Michael Morrow, 'Thanat's Interview', *Far Eastern Economic Review* 88, no. 25 (June 1975): 34.

2 Leszek Buszynski, 'Thailand's Foreign Policy: Management of a Regional Vision', *Asian Survey* 34, no. 8 (1994): 724.

However, in reality, Chatichai continued to follow the recently constructed bamboo strategy. Thailand still believed in maintaining a flexible relationship with the great powers, and in moving toward a closer alignment with China. We can say that it is easier to imagine the end of the Cold War in Asia – the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, the end of Third Indochina War, and the peace settlement in Cambodia – than to imagine the end of bamboo diplomacy. Since then, the metaphor of bamboo diplomacy endures. As one scholar summarised, bamboo diplomacy has been ‘the norm in Thai foreign policy’.³

This book is first and foremost a genealogy of Thai détente and the concomitant narrative of bamboo diplomacy. It asserts a diplomatic discursive framework to understand and explicate the (trans)formation of Thai diplomacy toward the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China between 1968 and 1980. I argue that a genealogy of Thai détente can be explicated as a history of rupture and history of the present in order to reassess and reinterpret changing diplomatic discourses and practices. On the one hand, a history of rupture indicates how the discourse of détente emerged in the late 1960s, and developed in three main episodes, namely under Thanat Khoman, Chatichai Choonhavan and Kukrit Pramoj, and Kriangsak Chomanan. It also emphasises that the ascent of détente happened within discursive struggles with the hegemonic discourse of anticommunism. On the other hand, a history of the present demonstrates the knowledge production of bamboo diplomacy. It argues that bamboo diplomacy was recently produced during the détente era in Thailand. Rather than forming a long diplomatic tradition, it was the making of détente that produced the invented tradition of bamboo diplomacy. This chapter concludes with these two contributions, on which the book has sought to shed light.

8.1. Genealogy as a History of Rupture

The book argues that during the Cold War, Thailand did not have a continuity of diplomacy, but rather experienced a rupture in diplomatic practices. From the late 1950s, the dominant discourse in Thailand was anticommunism. It rendered communism – both as an ideology

3 Leszek Buszynski, ‘New Aspirations and Old Constraints in Thailand’s Foreign Policy’, *Asian Survey* 29, no. 11 (1989): 1057.

and a political struggle with the communist powers – a vital ‘threat’ to body politic and to the survival of the nation. The emergence of détente discourse marked a rupture in Thai diplomacy in the late 1960s when the communist powers began to be considered ‘friends’. To put it dialectically, détente can be counted as an antithesis of the anticommunist discourse, which was the predominant thesis.

Crucially, I argue that détente began even before the declaration of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 and that the key proponent, Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, initiated the concept of ‘flexible diplomacy’ and later ‘détente’ in order to seek rapprochement with the PRC and to readjust Thai–Soviet relations, hence bending before the wind. Kukrit Pramoj and Chatichai Choonhavan continued with détente in the democratic period. They established diplomatic relations with the PRC on 1 July 1975 and concluded a cultural agreement with the Soviet Union. From then, the discourse developed into balanced détente, which culminated in Kriangsak Chomanan’s stated policy of ‘equidistance’ toward the three great powers and was exemplified in his visits to three capitals, namely Beijing, Washington and Moscow. Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila called this balanced détente a ‘balance-of-power’ or realist strategy.⁴

A genealogy of Thai détente reconceptualises diplomacy in various ways. Firstly, diplomacy as knowledge production constituted a new form of diplomatic knowledge, framed by the notion of ‘bamboo’ diplomacy. Second, diplomacy as subject formation formed the subject positions of détente proponents, whose identity and interests were shaped by the discourse of détente. The strength of leading détente proponents such as Thanat, Kukrit and Kriangsak was partly due to the fact that they were formerly known as staunch anticommunists. With clear records of anticommunism, they were not vulnerable to any accusations of sympathising with the communists. Just as we say only Nixon could have gone to China, so we can say only Kukrit and Kriangsak could go to the PRC or the Soviet Union.

Third, diplomacy as institutionalisation. Détente rendered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) an independent source of foreign policy formulation. When anticommunism was the hegemonic discourse, military and security elites dominated Thai foreign policy decision-making while marginalising the MFA. During the 1970s, however,

4 Siddhi Savetsila, *Pan Rorn Pan Nao* [Through Thick and Thin] (Bangkok, 2013), 78, 191.

foreign affairs for the first time became a sphere where the MFA would be the sole institution and legitimate actor, while Thai diplomats began to protect their own turf.

Fourth, diplomacy as a power struggle. The discourse of détente did not prevail without a fight. Those anticommunists incessantly sought to strike back, which led to showdowns including the coups in November 1971 and October 1976. However, the 1971 coup did not terminate détente. Instead, slow détente was pursued through sports and petro-diplomacy with the PRC. The 1976 coup, which installed the militant anticommunist regime of Thanin Kraivichien, lasted only a year and was replaced by Kriangsak in late 1977. The détente discourse was once again strengthened, although subtly reformulated to maintain what was described as equidistance or balanced détente with the communist powers. By the end of the 1970s, anticommunism gradually faded from the discursive struggle in Thai politics, and everyone was to an extent a détente proponent.

The fall of Kriangsak in early 1980 was the result of another discursive struggle, or what I call ‘intra-discursive struggle’. This time it was between two versions of détente. On the one hand, proponents of balanced détente argued for Thailand to keep an equal and balanced relationship with the great powers while seeing détente with Vietnam as a possibility. On the other, proponents of unbalanced détente promoted a closer alliance with the PRC and saw détente with Vietnam as unnecessary or even dangerous. The unbalanced form of détente prevailed.

Those who supported unbalanced détente, especially the conservative military elites, became the key actors in the Prem Government in the 1980s. This was the beginning of a shrewdly pro-Chinese Thai foreign policy, which Pongphisoot awkwardly terms as a ‘bamboo swirling in the wind’⁵. Despite the Sino–Thai quasi-alliance, the discourse of détente remained intact in a double sense. First, the discourse of anticommunism no longer existed in Thai diplomatic discourses and practices with the communist powers. Second, flexible diplomacy and its corresponding languages of friendship towards the communist powers endured up to the end of the Cold War. In other words, Thailand adhered to the pro-Chinese stance, while maintaining a correct but distant relationship with Moscow.

5 Pongphisoot Busbarat, ‘Bamboo Swirling in the Wind: Thailand’s Foreign Policy Imbalance between China and the United States’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 2 (2016): 233.

The new discursive struggle between balanced and unbalanced détente has continued to dominate Thai diplomacy since the détente period. Three examples are, as follows:

First, Prem Tinsulanonda's diplomacy was ruled by unbalanced détente. Prem's foreign minister, Air Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, called it 'omnidirectional foreign policy'. In his 1985 article, 'The Future of Thailand's Foreign Policy', Siddhi claimed:

Five years ago you will recall that we lived in a period of great anxiety ... All this forced us to confine the conduct of our foreign policy mostly within the political and security fields. There was no time to think of foreign policy as an instrument to enhance the national well-being, much less creating new initiatives in other fields ... We were in the process of becoming mired by the prudent, the tactical, or the expedient. The tendency was more toward solving the crisis of the day.⁶

'For the first time', Siddhi continued, 'I think it is fair to say that our sense of direction has returned. So have our self-confidence and pride. We have adapted well to the changing circumstances'. He laid out the new omnidirectional foreign policy, stating:

it is therefore obvious that we need now, more than ever, to conduct our foreign policy with perseverance, persistence, subtlety, and flexibility. We must also be prepared to accept the fact that what has been achieved at one point may lost its significance as conditions change and that it may not always completely satisfy our principles ... With our expanded role we must build a new set of foreign policy principles, similar in scope but different in content.⁷

To put it differently, Siddhi suggested that this novel 'omnidirectional' diplomacy was 'similar in scope' but 'different in content' from the traditional 'bamboo' diplomacy: unbalanced détente. For Siddhi, the outline of this new foreign policy was based on four principles: (1) active diplomacy provides the best guarantee for Thai national security; (2) solidarity with ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) is an overriding priority; (3) strengthening Thailand's relations with great powers is necessary; and (4) the conduct of foreign affairs is inextricably

6 Siddhi Savetsila, 'The Future of Thai Foreign Policy', *Bangkok Post*, 18 January 1985.

7 Siddhi, 'The Future of Thai Foreign Policy'.

linked to the well-being of the Thai people, and every diplomatic tool should be used for Thai socio-economic development.⁸ Regarding relations with the great powers, the Prem Government moved toward a closer alignment with China, while to a lesser extent maintaining friendly relations with the Soviet Union.

Second, the discursive struggle can be found across society, especially within the academic community. In the 1980s, a debate emerged at Chulalongkorn University between the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS Thailand).⁹ It was a debate between unbalanced and balanced détente discourses. On the one hand, the IAS, led by its Director and Professor in International Relations, Khien Theeravit, firmly supported the Foreign Ministry's position that the PRC was the natural counterweight to Vietnam, and Thai foreign policy should endorse the Khmer Rouge regime. According to Khien:

The question for us as a neighbor to the 'Big' Vietnam is whether we would allow the big fish (Vietnam) to swallow the small fish (Cambodia), which is now struck in the big fish's throat; whether we should stay idle and let a few leaders in Hanoi brutalize innocent Cambodians and Vietnamese; whether we should tolerate threats and shoulder the displaced people who escaped the killing by the ruthless people. I think we should not stay idle. We cannot accept it, not because we hate Vietnam, but because Cambodia's independence is our problem too. Man is not a wild animal, which tends to resort to violent means and ignore what is right or wrong. Even Vietnam itself doesn't want to be a wild animal because she is trying to be a member of the United Nations. However, Vietnam only wants to obtain rights, not the duty and obligations of the UN resolution. Therefore, we must oppose Vietnam's aggression and expose its deception and real goal.¹⁰

8 Eric Teo Chu Cheow, 'New Omnidirectional Overtures in Thai Foreign Policy', *Asian Survey* 26, no. 7 (1986): 747.

9 I argue elsewhere that this debate generated the 'first great debate' in the discipline of international relations in Thailand. See Jittipat Poonkham, 'Why is there no Thai (Critical) International Relations Theory? Great Debates Revisited, Critical Theory, and Dissensus of IR in Thailand', in *International Relations as a Discipline in Thailand: Theory and Sub-fields*, ed. Chanintira na Thalang, Soravis Jayanama and Jittipat Poonkham (London: Routledge, 2019), Chapter 2.

10 Khien Theeravit, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective: Positions and Viewpoints* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, 1985).

On the other hand, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies promoted the discourse of balanced détente with the great powers. The Institute's Director, MR Sukhumbhand Paribatra, criticised Prem's foreign policy. In an interview, he argued:

the Thai government, among others, takes a rather complacent attitude towards this problem, at most admitting that the Khmer Rouge issue can be tackled as a part of the political settlement or after that political settlement has been reached. This is partly due to conceptual naivety, partly to fear of antagonising Thailand's Chinese patron, partly to continuing distrust of Vietnam and partly to the existence of bureaucratic vested interests in the Khmer Rouge connection ... The point is that there can never be a stable, durable and just political solution in Kampuchea as long as the Khmer Rouge is allowed to retain its present leadership or maintain its present level of military strength.¹¹

Sukhumbhand recommended that 'what is needed here is flexibility, vision, and a willingness to re-examine past assumptions. Without these, the best we can hope for is a continuing stalemate – with all its implications'.¹² First:

Thailand should perhaps consider ASEAN as an end in itself and strive to create within that organization a regional order whose purpose would go beyond common solidarity against one specific threat, toward a more distant (yet more self-fulfilling) horizon of idealism ... Without this change in Thailand's security perception, no modus vivendi can be found on mainland Southeast Asia.¹³

Second, the ASEAN countries, together with the Western powers, needed to promote cross-linkages and offer economic incentives and aid to Vietnam and Kampuchea.¹⁴ During the Chatichai Choonhavan Government (August 1988 – February 1991), Sukhumbhand was appointed as a key advisor to the prime minister.

11 Quoted in Puangthong Pawakapan, 'Thailand's Response to the Cambodian Genocide', in *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives*, ed. Susan E Cook (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 100.

12 Sukhumbhand Paribatra, 'Can ASEAN break the stalemate?', *World Policy Journal* 3, no. 1 (1985): 104.

13 Sukhumbhand Paribatra, 'Strategic Implications of the Indochina Conflict', *Asian Affairs* 11, no. 3 (1984): 44.

14 Sukhumbhand, 'Can ASEAN break the stalemate?', 103.

The third example of the intra-discursive struggle was the foreign policy of Chatichai Choonhavan, the first elected prime minister since 1976. This was a return to balanced *détente* discourse. At the outset, Chatichai sought to control foreign policy formulation under his newly established policy advisors at Ban Phitsanulok, two of which were Sukhumbhand and Kraisak Choonhavan, his own son and lecturer in political science at Kasetsart University. This caused a major conflict between Chatichai's foreign policy advisors and Siddhi's Foreign Ministry: once again instigating a power struggle between balanced and unbalanced *détentes*. Both Sukhumbhand and Kraisak strongly criticised Siddhi's foreign policy, which largely depended on the great powers. They advocated greater independence in foreign policy, were opposed to Thailand's support for the Khmer Rouge, and urged economic interdependence among the neighbouring countries. The latter culminated in Chatichai's notion of 'turning Indochina from battlefield to marketplace', and 'Suwannabhumi' (golden peninsula), which focused on Thailand's economic leverages to link Vietnam into a regional network of economic interdependence.¹⁵

'Rapprochement with Vietnam', Chatichai asserted at a December 1988 speech before the Foreign Correspondents' Club, was 'one of my top priorities'. He added that 'Indochina must be transformed from a war-zone to a peace-zone linked with Southeast Asia through trade ties, investment, and modern communications'. 'Politics', stressed Chatichai, 'will take second place to economics'.¹⁶ While he publicly supported the idea of developing trade relations with Indochina, Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila argued that it should be done only after the resolution of the Cambodian issue. Chatichai's foreign policy advisors made statements challenging Siddhi's position and contesting the right of the foreign minister to define priorities in foreign affairs. Sukhumbhand also revealed that the prime minister intended to visit Vietnam and to assume a greater role in foreign policy.¹⁷

The discursive clash between balanced and unbalanced *détente* worsened. The Foreign Ministry officials regarded the prime minister's advisors as essentially illegitimate diplomats or upstarts. Warning against what he called 'sensational diplomacy', Siddhi, who was also the leader of the Social

15 See Sunai Phasuk, 'Thai Foreign Policy: A Case Study on the Policy Formulation Process of General Chatichai Choonhavan's Government on the Cambodian Problem (4 August 1988 to 23 February 1991)' (MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1986).

16 Buszynski, 'New Aspirations and Old Constraints', 1059.

17 Buszynski, 'New Aspirations and Old Constraints', 1062.

Action Party, insisted that changes to Thai foreign policy ought to be introduced gradually to achieve consensus. In an effort to reduce tension without conceding his position, Chatichai made a distinction between government-sponsored trade with Vietnam and private trade. While the former was dependent on Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia, the latter could come prior.¹⁸ While Sukhumbhand resigned in August 1989, the discourse and policies of balanced détente continued in Chatichai's foreign policy and Thai diplomacy thereafter. These three examples have illustrated the persistence of the détente discourse and the intra-discursive struggle after the long 1970s.

By tracing a genealogy of détente, it is therefore possible to fully understand a discontinuity in Thai diplomacy from the late 1960s. Proponents of Thai détente not only contested the anticommunism discourse but established détente itself a new hegemonic idea in the foreign policymaking process. At the onset of its hegemonic status, détente encountered conceptual contradictions from within. A dual form of détente emerged by the end of the decade: balanced and unbalanced détente with the communist powers. This dual track lent itself to an intra-discursive struggle. Prem and Siddhi's 'omnidirectional' foreign policy was neither a reversal of détente nor a return to the discourse of anticommunism. Rather, it was a modified détente discourse – a synthesis of an unbalanced détente. It was guided by the formation of a quasi-alliance with the PRC and the US in the Third Indochina War. Nevertheless, the emphasis on détente with the Soviet Union faded but did not vanish. Thailand and the Soviet Union remained what they called 'friends'.

8.2. Genealogy as a History of the Present

'The myth of the success of Thai foreign policy due to its flexibility to "bend with the prevailing wind"', asserts Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'needs a serious reinterpretation'.¹⁹ Following this proposition, the book goes one step further: to historically problematise or genealogise the narrative of bamboo diplomacy. It has demonstrated how bamboo diplomacy narrative was constructed only in the 1970s.

18 Buszynski, 'New Aspirations and Old Constraints', 1062–63.

19 Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010), 5.

The narrative of bamboo diplomacy was, and remains, powerful in both policymaking and academic communities. Yet, few have stopped to ask why it is so dominant, especially within academia, and how it became a metanarrative, which cannot be easily transcended. Even those self-reflexive and critical-minded scholars, such as, *inter alia*, Arne Kislenko, Sutayut Osornprasop, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Thitinan Pongsudhirak and Pongphisoot Busbarat share a certain common ground. Namely, they see bamboo diplomacy as a tradition, while recognising its continuity. It thus becomes a flawless strategy and/or heuristic device for evaluating the success or failure of Thai foreign policy at any given time.

In the most oft-cited article, entitled 'Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy', Arne Kislenko asserts:

whatever new winds blow in the region, Thailand will undoubtedly try to accommodate them. With an emphasis on flexibility, and a remarkable history of continuity, Thai foreign policy – like a bamboo – faces the 21st Century with solid roots.²⁰

In his thesis, Kislenko also conceptualises Thai foreign policy during the Cold War as 'the bamboo in the wind', which was 'always solidly rooted, but flexible enough to bend whichever way it had to in order to survive'. In other words, bamboo diplomacy was a key to national survival. It does not reflect 'mere pragmatism' but more importantly 'a long-cherished, philosophical approach to international relations', which is deeply rooted in Thai culture and religion. He claims:

although the Thais had in the past entered into diplomatic pacts with foreign powers, they were extremely careful to avoid anything more than temporary arrangements. Formal alliances of any kind were infrequent in Thai history, and Thais considered the stationing of even friendly foreign troops on their soil a serious affront to their independence.²¹

However, Kislenko's proposition largely contradicts his main argument that in the 1960s, the special relationship forged with the US 'seemed only logical, and entirely consistent with the "bamboo" nature of Thai diplomacy'. He contends that these closer ties were not 'a fundamental

20 Arne Kislenko, 'Bending with the Wind: The Continuity and Flexibility of Thai Foreign Policy', *International Journal* 57, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 561.

21 Arne Kislenko, 'Bamboo in the Wind: United States Foreign Policy and Thailand during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, 1961–1969' (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2000), 8.

digression from its traditional and renowned foreign policy flexibility'.²² He even holds that by the end of the 1960s, when it became apparent that the US military was losing in Vietnam, Thailand changed course in line with bamboo diplomacy. As Kislenko put it, Thailand 'bent its foreign policy with the new winds in Southeast Asia towards a peaceful accommodation with China and Vietnam'.²³ In his final analysis, 'the bamboo bent, but it never did break'.²⁴

Likewise, in his multi-archival dissertation on Thailand's covert military intervention in Laos during 1960–1974, Sutayut Osornprasop concludes that the emerging Sino–Thai alliance against Hanoi's expansionism since the late 1970s was 'Thailand's traditional foreign policy of "bending as bamboo and never breaking"', rather than 'a hawkish, military-oriented policy'.²⁵ As he put it:

Interestingly, Bangkok had formed a close alliance with Washington against Beijing during the 1960s and the early half of the 1970s in order to obstruct Chinese expansion southwards. But with the American departure from mainland Southeast Asia, the Thais were successful in turning an old threat into an opportunity, and formed a new alliance with Beijing to deter Hanoi.

Bamboo diplomacy, according to Sutayut, 'had helped preserve Thailand's security and sovereignty throughout the country's history. It would protect Thailand's interests throughout the tumultuous decades of the Cold War'.²⁶

Even one of the most critical intellectuals in Thai studies, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, implicitly adopts this traditional view of Thai diplomacy without questioning its emergence. In an approach similar to the mainstream conservative narrative, he suggests that bamboo diplomacy is dubbed the accommodation policy, where the logic is simple: 'to go with the flow of the wind, to align with hegemonies of the day and to use this alliance to strengthen the power position of the Thai elites at home'. Its ultimate aim was to 'maintain national sovereignty and territorial integrity'.²⁷ While he

22 Kislenko, 'Bamboo in the Wind', 9, 320.

23 Kislenko, 'Bamboo in the Wind', 14.

24 Kislenko, 'Bamboo in the Wind', 330.

25 Sutayut Osornprasop, 'Thailand and the American Secret War in Indochina, 1960–1974' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2006), 237.

26 Sutayut, 'Thailand and the American Secret War', 237.

27 Pavin, *Reinventing Thailand*, 85–86.

traces this concept in Thai diplomatic history, Pavin only reiterates bamboo diplomacy as a 'traditional' or 'classic' Thai diplomacy. That is, what he envisions is the continuity and persistence of bamboo diplomacy – 'since Siam's old days up to Thailand's modern era'.²⁸

Second, rather than reinterpret bamboo diplomacy, as he initially aims, Pavin evaluates the success of Thaksin's foreign policy based on the key criterion of bamboo diplomacy, which, for him, was guided by flexibility, pragmatism and opportunism. He claims that Thaksin's diplomacy was no longer bending with the wind, but instead sought to 'set' or 'manipulate' the direction of the wind.²⁹ A deviation from bamboo diplomacy, therefore, rendered Thaksin's foreign policy 'unsuccessful' and 'unsustainable'.³⁰ Pavin contends:

the old bamboo policy may have no longer been desirable in the eyes of Thaksin since he embarked on a new process of reinventing Thailand and reinventing himself as a prominent regional leader. But what has remained intact ... is the adoption of the accommodation approach in Thai foreign policy.³¹

In other words, for Pavin, bamboo diplomacy remains intact, and sets the gold standard for evaluating Thai diplomacy.

Pongphisoot Busbarat follows this same line of argument. In a recent article, he claims that Thailand since the early 2000s has encountered difficulties in maintaining 'its time-honored diplomatic tradition of flexibility and pragmatism'. Contemporary Thai foreign policy was shrewdly pro-Chinese. Pongphisoot labelled this policy 'bamboo swirling in the wind'. For him, it increasingly deviates from the 'conventional "bending with the wind" diplomacy that tends to reflect a better-calculated strategy to balance Great Power influence'.³²

Even when scholars criticise the current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's diplomacy, they tend to employ a lens of 'bamboo diplomacy'. As Thitinan Pongsudhirak, political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, puts it, Thailand is

28 Pavin, *Reinventing Thailand*, 63–64, 274.

29 Pavin, *Reinventing Thailand*, 34–36.

30 Pavin, *Reinventing Thailand*, 272–76.

31 Pavin, *Reinventing Thailand*, 274.

32 Pongphisoot, 'Bamboo Swirling in the Wind', 233.

demonstrably famous for its foreign policy balancing. From the era of imperialism and two World Wars through the Cold War, Thailand's gifted geography and diplomatic finesse and skill shepherded the country's sovereignty and independence through the thick and thin of geopolitical headwinds.³³

According to Thitinan, 'whatever happens out there, the Thais (and their Siamese forebears) had a way to diplomatically navigate and geopolitically balance their national interests to stay out of harm's way'. 'Centuries of diplomatic ingenuity and geographic luck' is however undermined by 'quick and careless acts of injudicious leadership'.³⁴

Until now, bamboo diplomacy serves not only to narrate transhistorical diplomatic practices but also to make a judgment on the achievement of respective Thai foreign policies. This in turn assumes that 'great' foreign policy is the product of a 'great' leader's far-sightedness, diplomatic flexibility and pragmatism. They must demonstrate an understanding of Thailand's geographically strategic location and the sustainability of so-called 'national interests'. Arguably, even the most critically engaged scholar of Thailand in the modern era, Benedict Anderson has extolled 'bamboo diplomacy' as a 'uniquely Thai' blend of realism and flexibility.³⁵

However, what is mystified by this mainstream explanation is the making of the bamboo diplomacy. It lacks two historical problematisations. First, this existing literature neglects the way in which the knowledge of bamboo diplomacy was constructed within historical time, and was a very recent conceptual lexicon. Knowledge production of bamboo diplomacy was, as argued here, the result of the changing diplomatic discursive practices or *détente* in the long 1970s. It was at this point, and not before, that bamboo diplomacy arose. The introduction of 'bamboo diplomacy' was thus not continuity, but the product of rupture or discontinuity. It rather emerged as a direct result of an epistemological break and a shift in diplomatic practices related explicitly and only to *détente*.

33 Thitinan Pongsudhirak, 'Thai Geopolitical Balancing Compromised', *Bangkok Post*, 6 July 2018.

34 Thitinan, 'Thai Geopolitical Balancing Compromised'.

35 Benedict Anderson, 'Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup', in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2014), 48–49.

While there may have been previous mention of bamboo diplomacy before the 1970s, it was only then that the term became accepted knowledge, epistemically. It did so within academic and policy-producing communities for whom the notion had become of clear use. In academia, pioneering works, led by Likhit Dhiravegin, Sarasin Viraphol and Thamsook Numnonda, only appeared in the 1970s, and began to narrate Thai foreign policy through the lens of 'bamboo diplomacy' (as indicated in Chapter 1). This not only explained contemporary Thai foreign policy,³⁶ but was also the first time that the conceptual lexicon was employed to explicate Thai diplomacy in the past, such as to describe Siam's approach during the colonial period in the nineteenth century, and again, to explain (or more accurately to obscure) Thailand's position during the Second World War.³⁷

Normatively, bamboo diplomacy justified the emerging discourse of flexible diplomacy and the technocratic role of the MFA in formulating foreign policy and relations with other countries. In other words, it legitimised the détente strategy and the practices of those détente proponents during and since the long 1970s. A genealogy of détente thus sheds light on the birth of bamboo diplomacy in terms of knowledge and practices transformation.

Secondly, the mainstream literature also naturalises and essentialises the conventional wisdom and wit of the bamboo diplomacy narrative. It treats bamboo diplomacy as if it is a 'tradition' of Thai diplomacy. If anything, however, this is an invented tradition.³⁸ Moreover, the essentialising of bamboo diplomacy led to some setbacks. First, the literature ignores the fact that bamboo diplomacy emerged out of a discursive struggle linked to contested power politics. It was neither a neutral nor value-free concept: it was inherently political and developed to overtly oppose the bipolar anticommunism of the early Cold War and to realign with a changed geopolitical reality.

36 Sarasin Viraphol, *Directions in Thai Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1976).

37 Likhit Dhiravegin, 'Thailand Foreign Policy Determination', *The Journal of Social Sciences* 11, no. 4 (1974); Likhit Dhiravegin, *Siam and Colonialism (1855–1909): An Analysis of Diplomatic Relation* (Bangkok: Thai Wattana Panich, 1975); Thamsook Numnonda, *Thailand and the Japanese Presence, 1941–1945* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1977).

38 I borrow the term from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

The second drawback is that given its status as a ‘classic’ or ‘traditional’ policy, bamboo diplomacy is a powerful heuristic device that determines how particular governments or periods of time are judged or deemed successes or failures. In turn, it can legitimise one set of foreign policy approaches while delegitimising others. The risk here is of determinism in Thai foreign policy, which overemphasises realism or profits at the expense of neglecting universal or cosmopolitan principles as motives for Thailand’s foreign relations.³⁹

The third drawback is that bamboo diplomacy is cast as a unique characteristic of the Thai nation in two senses. First, Thailand is accordingly viewed as an exceptional country that maintained independence and integrity in the midst of colonialism in the nineteenth century – due to its successful policy. This indicates the flawless continuation of Thai foreign policy and the far-sightedness of the elites, either the king or the military. Bamboo diplomacy tends to be nationalistic and chauvinistic. Second, Thailand is unique in the sense that it cannot be compared with other countries. This tends to cause hubris in Thai foreign policy.

The final drawback is that despite its status as an innovation in the 1970s, bamboo diplomacy is first and foremost a conservative project. It serves the status quo, dominated by the predominant role and position of the MFA. It is presumed to be an art adopted entirely by the Thai elites, and suggests a lack of any participation from the public in determining foreign policy. As long as this metanarrative exists, therefore, it remains difficult to imagine an alternative means to conduct Thai diplomacy, let alone of democratizing it. Given these impediments, Thai diplomacy needs to be emancipated from the dominant perspective in order to adopt a genuinely balanced, equal and people-oriented approach.

Concurring with Pavin’s proposition, I therefore argue that bamboo diplomacy is a myth that needs to be fundamentally reinterpreted, reassessed and rewritten. Moving beyond that, it should be genealogised or historically problematised in order to trace its emergence as a conceptual lexicon within historical time. Bamboo diplomacy, which is constituted by and constitutive of *détente*, is a novel knowledge that was recently produced in the 1970s and was reproduced thereafter. It was a by-product of Thailand’s shift in diplomacy toward *détente* with the communist

39 See Kusuma Snitwongse, ‘Thai Foreign Policy in the Global Age: Principle or Profit?’ *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23, no. 2 (2001).

powers. Since then, bamboo diplomacy praxeologically shapes the way in which Thailand balances its position within global politics, and in particular its relationship with the great powers. It epistemically narrates or explicates Thai diplomatic discourses and practices in the past, and determines foreign policymaking processes in the present and the future. Bamboo diplomacy is an invented tradition of Thai diplomacy.

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